They say they “Don’t Know”
What can we learn about uncertainty and the college transition from students’ survey responses?

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**Purposes**

- to explore potential meanings of DK responses related to certainty about college

- to understand how common predictors of the college transition may predict DK responses and uncertainty about the college transition

- to understand the college enrollment outcomes of DK respondents who may be uncertain about college enrollment and/or attainment
Literature – How do researchers handle DK responses?

- Make DK responses missing data (e.g., Garrison, 1982; Kelpe Kern, 2000; Lowman & Elliot, 2008; Morgan, 1996)
- Retain the DK data, coding it as the lowest expectation (e.g., Cabrera & La Nasa, 2001; Flowers, Milner & Moore, 2003)
- Retain the data as its own category (e.g., Ishitani, 2006 labeled these as “unsure”)
- Many studies are not explicit about this
Data & Methods

- ELS 2002-2006
- Comparison of DK Responses for differing questions
  - Crosstabs
- Predictors of DK Responses
  - Binary and multinomial logistic regression – responded DK vs. college-positive and college-negative responses
- Enrollment outcomes for DK respondents
  - Binary logistic regression – enrolled vs. not enrolled, with DK response as a predictor
Results

- About 7% of students responded DK for expectations.
- About 5% of students responded DK for plans.
- Less than 20% of students who responded DK about the level of education expected also answered DK in response to plans for future schooling.
## Results

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th></th>
<th>Do not plan for future schooling</th>
<th>Plan for future schooling</th>
<th>Don’t know about plans for future schooling</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Do not expect any college</td>
<td>140</td>
<td>200</td>
<td>140</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Expect some college</td>
<td>60</td>
<td>11,080</td>
<td>220</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>DK about educational</td>
<td>20</td>
<td>700</td>
<td>170</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>expectations</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
Selected Results – Predictors of DK Responses

- Latinos = slightly higher odds (than Whites) of DK about attainment expectations, but no difference regarding enrollment plans.
- Blacks = no difference in DK related to attainment expectations, but lower odds (than Whites) of DK for college plans.
- No gender difference in DK for attainment expectations, but lower female odds of DK for enrollment plans.
Results – Enrollment outcomes

- Positive expectations/plans predict higher odds of enrollment compared to the DK response, and the negative expectation predicts much lower odds of enrollment compared to the DK response.

- The uncertain cohort of respondents appear to differ in their enrollment outcomes, even controlling for many salient factors, compared to either the college-positive cohort or the college-negative cohort.
Implications for survey design and quantitative research

- Attainment expectations and enrollment plans are different, and should be treated as such
- Uncertainty is not a dichotomous construct by nature, although researchers often represent it that way, and more innovative methods should be considered
- How should researchers handle DK respondents in statistical analysis?
Implications for the college transition

- Past research may actually under-represent the number of students who expect to attend college, based on misuse of DK responses.
- Gender or racial gaps may be misrepresented depending on the handling of DK responses.
- For policy and practice, the DK or uncertain students should also be treated as unique, and not assumed to be college-negative.
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